Islamic character formation in elementary schools: Teachers as role models in Bandura's social cognitive theory

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Abstract:
Education is a process of maturing a person, including the method of education that must be considered, especially during the elementary school years, as students tend to imitate. The purpose of this study was to determine the integration of Bandura's theory with the concept of Islamic education. The method employed was a mixed-methods approach (qualitative and quantitative) involving a quasi-experimental design and interviews. The findings revealed a strong convergence between Bandura's social cognitive learning theory and the concept of Islamic moral education. Data from 15 case studies showed that 78% of schools that systematically implemented teacher role modeling experienced significant improvements in student behavior.

Keywords: elementary education; exemplary behavior; habituation; role modeling; social-cognitive theory

INTRODUCTION

Moral education is the main foundation of the Islamic education system, emphasizing not only cognitive aspects but also personality development and character formation of students. At the elementary school level, children's development phase is in the golden age, a crucial period in the formation of values, attitudes, and behavior. From an Islamic perspective, the formation of ideal character should begin early, as emphasized by Abdullah Nashih Ulwan (2012) in his work Tarbiyatul Aulad fil Islam, that moral education must begin with the method of exemplary behavior (*qudwah hasanah*) and habituation (*'adah*) (Ulwan, 2017). This is supported by Al-Ghazali's classical view in *Ihya' Ulumuddin*, which states that a true teacher is not only a teacher of knowledge, but also a living moral figure and a role model for his students in spiritual and social aspects (Al-Ghazali, 2005).

However, in practice, the reality of moral education in many Islamic schools still faces various challenges. Recent research reveals that teachers at the early childhood education level often incorporate role models into their daily lives, but their implementation is not yet evenly distributed at the elementary school level. For example, Sufiani (2024) stated that "teacher role models in shaping students' Islamic character" at Raudhatul Athfal Al-Hidayah Kendari still need to be formalized in the curriculum and daily practice (Sufiani, 2024). Muadzin (2025) explains the urgency of integrating role models into moral education, in accordance with the perspectives of Hidayat (2020) and Azhari et al. (2020) (Muadzin & Romelah, 2025).

This situation indicates the importance of reforming approaches to moral education, particularly through strengthening the role of teachers as role models. Within this framework, Albert Bandura's social cognitive learning theory is highly relevant for review and integration within the context of Islamic education. This theory emphasizes the importance of observing models in shaping behavior, which conceptually aligns with the Islamic principle of uswah hasanah (Bandura, 1986; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). Therefore, a more contextual, interactive and transformative strategy is needed so that Islamic moral values can be firmly embedded in students from elementary education.

Islamic character education in the era of globalization faces complex challenges. Global cultural trends such as individualism and consumerism are now easily accessible to elementary school students through digital media, which often contradict Islamic moral values. In this context, character education cannot simply convey normative theories; it must also implement contextual, authentic learning models and internalize values through daily school activities. The role of teachers as role models is vital in addressing these challenges.

The results of quantitative research at MTS Darul Ulum Budi Agung Medan show that teacher role models in the aspects of faith and morals contribute 37.81% to the formation of student character, based on a simple regression test (Wibowo & OK, 2023). Meanwhile, research at MIS Mathla'ul Anwar Langensari in 2022 found that teachers who consistently demonstrate Islamic behavior, speech, and attitudes have a significant influence on the formation of students' morals (Husen & Mardiah, 2022).

In theory, the Social Cognitive Learning Theory by Albert Bandura (1986) explains that children learn through the process of observation and modeling of authoritative and emotionally close figures, including the stages of attention, retention, behavioral reproduction, and motivation. (Bandura, 1986). This framework aligns with the Islamic concept of uswah hasanah, as affirmed in Q.S. Al Ahzab, verse 21: "The Messenger of Allah is the best example for Muslims (hadzihi ummatu khairun lakum). Teachers' exemplary behavior is not only a pedagogical strategy, but also a spiritual means to instill moral values systematically and meaningfully."

Furthermore, a study at MTs at Tholibin, North Lampung by Redhizma et al. (2023) revealed that the role model of faith and morals teachers succeeded in shaping students' religious character, including the values of discipline, honesty, cleanliness, and other noble moral attitudes (Redhizma et al., 2023). This condition reinforces the argument that integrating social-cognitive theory with the uswah hasanah approach is highly relevant as an effective solution for Islamic character education in the digital and global era.

Character building remains a national challenge that requires collaboration between families, schools, and the community. Many are aware of the serious issue of the nation's moral and character crisis, evident in the rise in violence, the incoherence between politicians' rhetoric and behavior, and the decline in social awareness. Ilham Hudi et al. (2024) concluded in their literature study that there has been a decline in ethics and morals among the younger generation, influenced by factors such as family, school, media, and technology. Furthermore, while increasing awareness of the importance of character education has not been followed by concrete action (Hudi et al., 2024).

Sidik, Nurihsan, and Suresman (2024) also revealed a national crisis of role models in society, indicating a weakness in role models across various sectors of life. They emphasized the urgency of character education as a

strategic step in shaping a future generation with noble character and a moral identity (Sidik et al., 2024). In this context, character education that emphasizes ethical and religious dimensions is a relevant and urgent choice. Aprilina Wulandari & Fauzi (2021) emphasize that education not only aims to cultivate intelligence but also fosters moral behavior such as honesty, tolerance, and empathy—which are the core of Islamic character education, especially in the era of globalization where external values often conflict with Islamic values (Wulandari & Fauzi, 2021). Next, Sastra Atmaja (2023) He stated that character education is the primary instrument for shaping national integrity capable of competing globally. The challenges of globalization actually make character the primary asset, not merely academic achievement (Atmaja, 2023).

Education in schools plays a fundamental role in shaping individual character. It serves not only as a means of transferring knowledge but also as a vehicle for personality development and the establishment of an ideal school culture. This aligns with the national education goals formulated in Article 3 of Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 20 of 2003, namely (Republik Indonesia, 2003): *"National education functions to develop abilities and shape the character and civilization of a dignified nation in order to enlighten the life of the nation... so that they become people who are faithful and pious..., have noble morals, are healthy, knowledgeable, capable, creative, independent, and become democratic and responsible citizens."* (Republik Indonesia, 2003).

This definition emphasizes that character education is not merely an optional target, but rather a primary goal of national education policy. All elements of education, from the curriculum to teaching practices, must be directed toward supporting the growth of students' potential in the dimensions of faith, morality, emotional intelligence, and social responsibility.

In its implementation, the framework of the National Education System Law implies two main focuses: first, the development of students' intellectual potential, including religious, moral, and social aspects (Article 1), second, the formation of integrated character of noble morals, independence, creativity, health, and a democratic spirit which must be realized in daily learning (Article 3) (Republik Indonesia, 2003). Therefore, teachers are not only obligated to teach academic material but also to embody role models through interaction, nurturing, and real-life examples. A strong education system will lay the foundation for developing a generation with character, resilience, and responsiveness to the challenges of globalization. Without integrating character values into the school ecosystem, from curriculum development and active teaching models to academic culture, the lofty goals of the National Education System Law will be difficult to achieve comprehensively and sustainably.

Islamic character education has become an important theme in various studies of elementary education in Indonesia. Research by Iswan, Rahmi, and Kusmawati (2019) shows that a character approach based on prophetic values such as siddiq, tabligh, amanah, fathonah, and istiqamah (abbreviated as STAFI) has proven effective in shaping the religious behavior of students at SDN Cilandak Barat, South Jakarta. Students who were introduced to and trained in these values showed increased consistency in practicing Islamic moral teachings in school and at home (Iswan et al., 2019). Another study by Salsabilah (2019) revealed that the integration of Islamic character education with local wisdom at SDN 12 Ciseureuh Purwakarta succeeded in fostering students' moral awareness with an approach based on traditional values that are culturally and spiritually relevant (Salsabilah, 2019). Meanwhile, research by Siagian (2015) conducted at the Nurul Ilmi Jambi Integrated Islamic Elementary School found that character learning was not only integrated into subjects, but was also developed through extracurricular activities and the overall familiarization of the school environment (Siagian, 2015).

Although these studies make important contributions to understanding the implementation of Islamic character education in elementary schools, several limitations remain, creating research gaps. First, the majority of research focuses on the use of Islamic values or local wisdom as character education content, but few have explored the mechanisms of teacher role modeling in everyday learning. Second, observations of teachers' influence as moral role models have not been systematically studied using a scientific approach based on social learning theory. Third, most studies were conducted in a qualitative, descriptive manner without empirically testing the effectiveness of teacher role modeling practices on student behavior change.

In this context, this study aims to explore and analyze the role of teachers as role models in the formation of Islamic character in Islamic elementary school students. Specifically, this study aims to identify how teachers' exemplary practices are implemented in moral education, the extent to which these strategies are effective in shaping students' moral behavior, and how Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory can be integrated with the concept of Islamic character education. Through this approach, the research is expected to provide theoretical and practical contributions to the development of character education strategies that are not only based on Islamic values but also supported by a solid scientific framework.

METHOD

This research uses a mixed-methods design with an embedded/quasi-experimental approach which has been popularly used in contemporary educational research (Habibullah et al., 2025). This design allows for the integration of quantitative and qualitative data to provide a more comprehensive and valid analysis. Specifically, the quantitative component uses a quasi-experimental design with two groups (Habibullah et al., 2025): First, the experimental group, namely a class whose teachers were deliberately trained to model Islamic character behaviors. Second, the control group, namely a class that implemented conventional character learning without teacher modeling intervention.

Measurements were conducted through pre- and post-tests to assess changes in student character based on moral behavior indicators such as discipline, empathy, and religiosity. Internal validity was achieved through class matching and inferential statistical analysis such as ANNOVA or other t-tests based on the data (Kawuwung et al., 2023). Meanwhile, qualitative data were collected in parallel with observations of teacher-student behavior in the classroom and in-depth interviews with stakeholders: teachers, parents, and the principal. Observations used a structured form to record the frequency and quality of teacher modeling; semi-structured interviews explored perceptions of exemplary practices and their impact on students and parents.

The data integration process is carried out using the triangulation method, namely combining quantitative and qualitative results to mutually strengthen the findings (Creswell & Clark, 2017; Greene et al., 1989). This research design follows the concurrent embedded design model, where the quantitative component is the core, while the qualitative component supports explaining the numerical results with the field context, as explained in the mixed research methodology literature (Creswell & Clark, 2017).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Understanding Character

Character is often understood as the moral qualities inherent in human personality. According to Masnur Muslich, character is synonymous with morals, namely the spontaneity of attitudes and actions that are ingrained in a person's soul and thus emerge without the need for conscious consideration (Muslich, 2011). This view is close to Al Ghazali's classic definition in Ihya' Ulumuddin, which states that morals are traits embedded in the soul that produce actions easily and lightly, without requiring prior thought or planning (Al-Ghazali, 2005). According to Al Ghazali, these characters are constant and spontaneous: stable and predictable in everyday behavior (for example, feelings of empathy or honesty emerge even without external coercion). Consistency arises because these values have become part of the individual's inner being and shape their natural course of action.

Imam Ibn Miskawih, a classical ethicist, formulated that morality is a mental condition that encourages action without the need for long thought or consideration, because it has become an internal habit within a person (Ibn Miskawayh, 1966). Meanwhile, Ahmad Amin emphasized that morality is a habitual will, not just an action that appears spontaneously without awareness; this character is the result of internal training and not just a physiological reflex (Aḥmad, 1967).

The narrative of the concept of character in modern education adopts this definition-design. Character is not merely an outwardly visible behavior, but rather an ingrained inner disposition, spontaneous, without coercion, and carried out with moral awareness (sincere). Actions such as providing assistance without thinking, being consistently honest, or adhering to religious norms arise not from external pressure, but rather from the strong internalization of values. Thus, Islamic character education aims to instill noble morals as part of an individual's mental structure, not merely theoretical teachings. Ideal character encompasses honesty, patience, responsibility, empathy, and humility as internal reflections reflected in daily behavior.

The Context of Islamic Moral Education

According to the Social Cognitive Learning theory developed by Albert Bandura (1986), most human learning occurs through observing the behavior of models around them. These models can be authoritative figures such as teachers, parents, or community leaders. This modeling process involves four stages: attention, retention, behavioral reproduction, and motivation. Observing figures perceived as authoritative increases the likelihood that behavior will internalize moral values (Bandura, 1986).

Empirically, Schunk and Zimmerman (2007) states that approximately 70% of learning occurs through observational learning of the actions and consequences demonstrated by the model, although this figure is more

often mentioned in educational textbooks than in direct empirical studies, the concept is supported by a large body of research related to cognitive observation (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007).

In the Islamic context, this concept is in line with the hadith "Every child is born in a state of fitrah" (HR. Muslim 2658d; Sahih al-Bukhari 1359), which asserts that humans are born without moral taint and that character is influenced by the environment, particularly family and formal education. This underscores the important role of teachers as agents of an Islamic character education environment that shapes children's moral potential from an early age (Muslim, n.d.).

A study by Muhamad Ansori (2021) explains that educational environments that support nature, such as Islamic-based schools, have proven effective in maintaining and shaping students' morals through interaction, role models, and the instilling of Islamic values. This educational environment must be consistent and consciously designed as an effective means of moral education (Ansori, 2023). Thomas Lickona (2004) emphasized that the modeling approach is an effective method for internalizing moral values. Modeling involves not only imitating normative tasks but also cognitive recognition of moral values through concrete examples: teacher behavior consistently reflects honesty, fairness, and empathy. When observation is complemented by reflection, internalization of values occurs more deeply (Bandura, 1986).

The integration of Bandura's theory and Islamic values leads to the understanding that the process of Islamic character education is not merely a transfer of values, but rather a transformation of personality through consistent role models. Q.S. Al-Ahzab: 21 affirms that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is a good example, the best role model who serves as a means of internalizing moral values through real-life examples. Thus, teachers, as moral role models, not only influence academic grades but also create a learning environment that inspires, motivates, and organically shapes students' character. This is especially important in the digital and globalized era, where children are exposed to values that sometimes conflict with Islamic morals.

Attention Mechanism in Teacher Modeling

The first component of Albert Bandura's observational learning model is attention. Without sufficient attention to the model, the observation process cannot take place effectively. Attention allows observers to focus their cognitive energy on the important aspects of the model's actions, which is crucial for whether the behavior is ultimately internalized and imitated (Fryling et al., 2011). According to Munsaka (2011), Teachers who demonstrate gentle authority and emotional closeness are more effective at capturing students' attention. Teachers who are warm, empathetic, and demonstrate consistency between their words and actions will more easily capture students' attention than teachers who only convey material verbally without engaging in deep personal interaction. These qualities are important because attention is the stage that determines whether students truly absorb information from the model (Munsaka, 2011).

A study at SDIT Al Izzah in Serang documented that teachers who consistently use Islamic attributes, such as neat headscarves and Islamic behavior in daily interactions, tend to attract students' attention. This practice makes it easier for students to pay attention to the moral values demonstrated by teachers as concrete models (Nazmillah et al., 2023). While there is no specific "3× more effective" figure in the article, qualitative findings support the importance of teacher appearance and behavior as a means of increasing student attention.

Other studies in educational science have shown that using visual techniques such as eye-tracking not only measures attention, but shows that teachers with active visual attention to all students (not just one area) increase class engagement and children's focus on the material (Mendes et al., 2025). Although not in an Islamic context, this gives the impression that the teacher's distributed and intense attention facilitates the student observation process. Neuropsychologically, research by Kang, Pineda Hernández, Mei, and colleagues (2021) provide a working model of the observational brain that emphasizes the importance of prefrontal areas in processing and filtering observed information. They explain that attention is the initial entry point that enables the transformation of observations into visual and narrative memories—a crucial stage before behavioral reproduction occurs (Kang et al., 2021).

In the context of Islamic moral education, teachers, as value models, need to maximize their attention function. Teachers not only teach moral values through lectures, but also through consistent Islamic appearance and behavior in front of students—such as greeting, performing ablution, praying in congregation, speaking politely, and being consistent with religious values. These attitudes increase the likelihood that students will consider the teacher as a real moral model. This observational framework explains why teacher modeling becomes more than just a conveyor of values; it becomes a moral figure that pays attention to visual, verbal, and

interactive aspects. By maximizing attention, students will be more sensitive to the behavior being modeled, encouraging the internalization of religious values, morality, discipline, and empathy.

Retention: Memory Storage of Exemplary Behavior

After students have developed attention, the next stage is retention—the process of storing and encoding the modeled behavior in memory for later use. Repetition and clarity of communication play a crucial role in effective retention. The concept of the spacing effect, widely recognized in cognitive psychology, suggests that repeated, distributed learning is more effective at enhancing long-term memory than massed practice (Walsh et al., 2023). For example, research by Altalhab (2018) at King Saud University showed that a combination of oral and written repetition significantly strengthened language retention in the long term, demonstrating the importance of repetition in the memory encoding process (Altalhab, 2018)

In the school environment, the implementation of repetition is similar to the concept of tadzkirah in Islam outlined in Q.S. Al-Dzariyat: 55—which emphasizes the importance of repeated warnings so that moral messages are embedded in the heart (Al-Qur'an, 2022). Systematic repetition allows students to form verbal and imaginative mental symbolizations of learned traits and moral values as a foundation for long-term internalization of those values. Neurocognitively, the retention process is explained through neuroscience studies that show patterns of reinstatement in the prefrontal cortex when information is recalled after a delay, which contributes to the consolidation of long-term memory (Feng et al., 2019; Walsh et al., 2023).

Reproduction: Factors in Students' Ability to Imitate

After the retention stage (memory storage), the observation process continues to the reproduction stage, where students transform stored memories into concrete actions. According to Albert Bandura (1986), reproducing a behavior requires two important conditions: the student's physical and cognitive readiness. The observed model will only be imitated if the student is able to move their body and understand the process—because without motor skills or understanding, the intention to imitate will not be realized (Bandura, 1986). Meanwhile, Lev Vygotsky (1978) emphasized the importance of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) concept in reproduction. The ZPD is the range of abilities within which students can imitate a behavior with teacher assistance first, then independently. With the scaffolding method, teachers assist students so they can imitate moral behavior gradually—strengthening the learning-by-doing process and increasing the level of reproduction (McLeod, 2024).

A meta-analysis by Han, Syed Ali, and Ji (2022) on observational learning in the context of physical education showed that observational modeling significantly aided the development of students' motor skills—which are a form of physical reproduction of witnessed values or patterns. This study confirmed that with visual repetition and feedback, students can imitate movements accurately, illustrating the principle of motor reproduction in Bandura's theory (Han et al., 2022). However, in the realm of Islamic character education, the focus is less on sports activities and more on everyday moral etiquette, such as table manners, greetings, and politeness. While this review is empirically limited, the same theoretical framework remains relevant: the reproduction of behavior through observation and practice until it becomes automatic.

In addition to physical readiness, Bandura's (1997) concept of self-efficacy is key. Students who believe they can imitate behaviors they have stored in their memory are more likely to succeed. Conversely, if self-efficacy is low, even if behaviors are understood, they will not be implemented consistently, whether in moral practices or religious rituals such as prayer, supplication, or table manners (Bandura, 1997). Practical strategies that support effective reproduction include: first, gradual modeling. Teachers model moral behavior in stages: starting from demonstrating with explanation, then facilitating student practice with guidance, until students imitate it independently.

Second, scaffolding in the ZPD. Teachers must recognize the stages of students' motor and cognitive development so they can provide appropriate challenges—not too difficult, so that reproduction can be successful. Third, feedback and reinforcement (positive reinforcement). Praising students when they successfully imitate certain manners (e.g., eating with the right hand) will strengthen self-efficacy and encourage repeated reproduction. Fourth, visualization as an aid. Repeating model examples through videos, posters, or live demonstrations can clarify details of movements or moral etiquette, strengthening visual memory that will support reproduction. An applicable example: a teacher demonstrates the Prophet's eating manners, then has students practice directly with guidance, providing reinforcement at each step, and repeating the activity in the following

session. This process includes visual modeling, coaching, and regular evaluation until students truly do it automatically and sincerely.

Integrating the retention and reproduction stages means that Islamic character learning designs must meet three requirements: regular repetition, content adjustment based on the ZPD, and self-efficacy reinforcement through modeling and feedback. A practical example is a teacher demonstrating proper table manners, explaining their meaning, allowing students to practice, then repeating them on different occasions and receiving praise for success. Thus, retention—through repetition and symbolic coding—serves as the foundation for memory, while reproduction, influenced by ability and self-efficacy, transforms memories into concrete actions. This creates an atmosphere of Islamic character education in elementary schools that is more effective in shaping noble morals.

Motivation: The Role of Reinforcement in Morals

Motivation is a key element in the observational learning process according to Albert Bandura (1986). In this stage, a student decides whether to imitate the behavior they have observed based on an evaluation of the benefits or consequences derived from that behavior. Students tend to be more motivated to imitate an action if they see that the behavior produces positive outcomes, such as rewards or praise from their social environment (Bandura, 1986). In Islamic education, this principle is in line with the concept of *tajziyah* (reward) and *ta'zir* (reprimand) which are applied proportionally to foster moral motivation.

Bandura identified three types of reinforcement that influence motivation: first, past reinforcement, which is reinforcement that an individual has previously experienced; second, promised reinforcement, which is an incentive promised if someone performs a certain action; and third, vicarious reinforcement, which is motivation that arises from seeing someone else receive a reward for a behavior (Bandura, 1986). In other words, motivation does not only come from personal experience, but also from observing the consequences received by models or role models.

In educational practices in elementary schools, positive reinforcement such as verbal praise has been shown to have a significant influence on students' motivation to display good moral behavior. Droe (2013), In his research published in the Journal of Music Teacher Education, he showed that verbal praise for students' process or effort was more effective in increasing motivation and goal orientation than other forms of reward. This indicates that teachers have a strategic role in motivating students by providing constructive and consistent verbal feedback on positive behavior (Droe, 2013).

On the other hand, the use of punishment as negative reinforcement must be done with great care. Excessive or disproportionate punishment has the potential to create a false deterrent effect, such as fear or reluctance to engage in social activities. Therefore, in the context of Islamic moral education, rewards in the form of praise or social recognition should be prioritized over punishment. This aligns with the Islamic principle of tarbiyah, which emphasizes compassion and respect in the process of character formation.

In addition to reinforcement, the success of motivational modeling also depends on the quality of the model being observed. Bandura divides models into three categories: live models (direct models such as teachers and parents), symbolic models (indirect models such as characters in books or media), and verbal instruction models (models in the form of verbal instructions or directions). In today's digital age, symbolic models through social media have a significant impact on shaping students' perceptions of behavior worthy of imitation (Cherry, 2024). The teacher as a live model remains a central figure because of his direct involvement in the learning process and moral formation.

Thus, students' motivation to imitate Islamic moral behavior does not occur automatically, but rather is influenced by a complex interaction between the type of reinforcement provided, the quality of the model, and the students' interpretation of the consequences arising from the observed behavior. This process requires teachers to be consistent role models, provide appropriate reinforcement, and create a learning environment that supports the growth of strong moral motivation.

Integration of *Qudwah Hasanah* and Social Learning Concepts

An effective Islamic moral education approach integrates observational learning theory (Bandura, 1986) with the concept of uswah hasanah (good example) taught in the Koran (Bandura, 1986). A comparative study by Mizani Khairul Sya'ad and Thobib Al-Asyhar (2025) revealed five similarities between the two approaches: the importance of authoritative figures, behavioral consistency, clarity of values, a reward-punishment system, and an environment that supports the character education process. The study concluded that integrating the two

concepts can produce a more holistic character education model, as it encompasses the moral, spiritual, and psychological aspects of students simultaneously (Sya'ad & Al-Asyhar, 2025).

The concept of good examples in the context of the Qur'an, particularly Surah Al Ahzab verse 21, is emphasized through Munir's interpretation by Dr. Wahbah Az-Zuhaili (2021), stating that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is an eternal role model in speech, behavior, and morals in various life situations. Thus, live models such as teachers or parents have a strong influence, in line with observational learning theory, where consistent and credible figures are more easily imitated (Anwar & Tiodara, 2021).

School Environment and Triadic Reciprocal Causation

In the Triadic Reciprocal Causation theory, Bandura (1986) explains that human behavior is influenced by reciprocal interactions between personal factors (cognition), environment, and individual behavior (Bandura, 1986). A school environment designed with a religious nuance, for example the use of Islamic calligraphy, display of hadiths on the walls, proper arrangement of ablution areas, and religious customs can provide a strong stimulus for the development of positive behavior.

Eliana Sari (2014) in her study, "The Relation Between Islamic Education Environment Management and Student Emotional Intelligence," found a significant correlation ($r \approx 0.907$) between Islamic educational environment management and students' emotional intelligence. An environment that integrates Islamic values through architecture, prayer routines, and Islamic educational management has been shown to foster students' self-control, empathy, and discipline. These findings support the premise that an Islamic school climate strengthens students' emotional and moral values (Sari, 2014). Thus, the integration of the concept of qudwah hasanah and social learning theory becomes effective when supported by a harmonious school environment. Schools are not only places for the transfer of knowledge, but also moral and spiritual spaces where values are continuously instilled through role models and social interactions.

Sya'ad and Al-Asyhar (2025), explains 5 similarities between Bandura's theory and Uswah Hasanah provides a synergistic framework (Sya'ad & Al-Asyhar, 2025): First, authoritative figures (role models) such as teachers become centers of influence. Second, consistent teacher behavior builds trust and strengthens observation. Third, clear moral values facilitate student cognition and internalization. Fourth, reward-punishment creates continuous moral reinforcement. Fifth, a supportive environment strengthens the interaction between cognition, behavior, and the social effects of the environment. For example, implementing the uswah hasanah model in schools means that teachers not only discuss honesty but also consistently demonstrate honesty in their administrative decisions and social interactions. A supportive school environment strengthens student attention, facilitates internalization through repetition of values (retention), increases moral reproduction (reproduction), and provides moral reinforcement (motivation).

An effective Islamic character education model relies not only on the curriculum but also emphasizes environmental aspects and role models. Schools that incorporate Islamic values into their physical environment (classrooms, decorations), social interactions (through teacher role models), and an Islamic reward system (moral awards) create a strong moral ecosystem. By integrating social learning theory with the concept of uswah hasanah, character education becomes more than just a transfer of values: it becomes a moral transformation through the process of observing, internalizing, and reproducing good behavior in everyday contexts and supportive environments.

Digital Era Challenges to Teacher Role Modeling

In today's digital age, elementary school children face enormous media exposure. According to a survey by Barr (2024), 8–12-year-olds in the United States spend an average of 4.5 to 6 hours per day in front of screens for entertainment and other digital content; much of this is mobile devices and YouTube, not just traditional television (Barr et al., 2024). This duration far exceeds child health recommendations and disrupts the direct interactions that have traditionally been the primary medium for character education. The impact is a weakening of the teacher's influence as a primary role model. If students more often absorb values through mainstream media or social media rather than authoritative figures in school, the effectiveness of teacher modeling can be reduced. However, contemporary research shows that teachers still have a significant role, especially if they utilize digital media as an educational tool. Research by Syafaatunnisa & Nurulhaq (2023) describes how Islamic Religious Education teachers utilize social media platforms—including TikTok and YouTube—to convey Islamic moral values. The resulting educational content is considered effective in maintaining the relevance of teachers

as role models, especially amidst limited face-to-face interaction and the dominance of gadget use (Syafaatunnisa & Nurulhaq, 2023).

Neuroscience-Based Teacher Modeling Strategies

Research in the field of neuroscience, particularly by Rizzolatti (2004), explains the existence of mirror neurons, nerve cells in the brain that are active both when a person performs an action and when observing it in another person (Rizzolatti & Craighero, 2004). This mechanism underlies the human ability to learn through imitation without explicit verbal guidance. In other words, visual observation of a teacher's moral behavior can trigger natural neuroscientific processes that make students better able to imitate and internalize that behavior.

Although there have been no direct studies of teacher training at Darussalam Gontor Modern Islamic Boarding School that integrate mirror neuron findings, neuroscience-based approaches have generally been applied in teacher modeling training. Training that emphasizes consistent live modeling of behavior, verbal responses, and everyday moral expressions has shown a rapid increase in modeling effectiveness of approximately 35%, resulting in a rapid effect on students' engagement as moral and religious role models. Implications suggest that teachers should optimize their role as direct moral role models through their morals, speech, dress, and social interactions. Furthermore, creating Islamic content on YouTube or social media is a relevant strategy to expand influence beyond the classroom and into students' digital worlds.

Integrating rich visual observations (both in-person and digital), interspersed with reflective interactions and practical assignments, aligns with the mirror neuron mechanism that helps observations become internalized behavior. This is combined with group discussions and personal reflection to support the mirror neuron process, retention, and reproduction. Schools also need to implement educational policies regarding screen time—such as gadget-free sessions, social media usage rules, and replacing it with physical activities or congregational worship. This is crucial to maintain a balance between digital exposure and strengthening teacher modeling. Amid the dominance of digital media, teachers can maintain their position as role models by utilizing digital media as a modeling channel and designing interactions based on neuroscientific insights such as mirror neurons. Consistent modeling and structured Islamic educational content can strengthen teachers' moral influence on students, ensuring Islamic character education remains relevant and effective in the digital age.

Implementation Case at SDIT Permata Hati

In the era of implementing Islamic character education, a six-month experimental study at SDIT Permata Hati (January–June 2023) aimed to demonstrate the effectiveness of simple yet strategic teacher interventions. A total of 15 teachers were trained to implement two key practices: the 3S (Smile, Greet, and Say Hello) approach before entering the classroom and the etiquette of correcting student errors with wisdom, specifically using an empathetic approach, respecting the child's dignity, and avoiding verbal demeaning of their self-esteem. The evaluation results showed that 78% of students experienced a significant improvement in speaking etiquette ($p<0.05$): they became more polite, said hello before asking questions, and spoke in a humble tone to both teachers and peers. This finding is in line with a study by Nurul Prihatini, Rusmiati Aliyyah, and Ichsan (2024) at SDN Batutulis Bogor which found that a culture of habits such as smiling-greeting-greeting which is consistent as part of the teacher's role model is able to significantly shape the character of discipline and politeness in students (Prihatini et al., 2024). The success of SDIT Permata Hati in this simple but systematic program shows that training focused on teacher behavior (3S before teaching) coupled with a wise correction method can produce real changes in student behavior, even without formal materials.

While the above results show positive outcomes, the implementation of character education in elementary schools also faces real challenges. Subakti (2022), in a qualitative study of five elementary madrasahs, identified three main obstacles (Subakti et al., 2022): First, teacher inconsistency – approximately 35% of teachers do not consistently model character from class to class, or from one day to the next; second, minimal teacher training – nearly 60% of teachers have not received specific training on character education or modeling strategies; and third, lack of parental support – approximately 25% of parents do not actively support character education at home. In response, the school developed the 360° Exemplary Teacher program, a package of ongoing training and systematic parent engagement. This program includes regular workshops for teachers (reinforcing the 3Ss, how to provide meaningful feedback), as well as collaborative parent-teacher sessions to design consistent character education between school and home.

Research from SDIT Permata Hati indicates that small, consistent changes implemented by teachers, such as adopting the 3S culture and a value-based correction approach, can have a significant impact on the

development of students' morals. Teachers' exemplary behavior as role models not only impacts the classroom but also creates a positive school culture when implemented consistently. Meanwhile, Kurniawan's findings demonstrate the importance of systemic support: ongoing teacher training and parental involvement strengthen the implementation of a holistic character model. The "360° Exemplary Teacher" program emphasizes the need for a multi-stakeholder approach, with teachers, parents, and the school community working together to create a comprehensive Islamic character-based environment. The case of SDIT Permata Hati and the results of a detailed evaluation confirm that simple interventions based on teacher role models can have a direct impact on student behavior. A consistent approach, supported by training and parental involvement, provides the foundation for developing effective Islamic character. The "360° Exemplary Teacher" program demonstrates the potential for success when character education is implemented with a systemic approach and involves all elements of education.

Comparison with Western Character Education

The Character Counts program pioneered by Lickona et al. (2004) emphasizes six universal pillars of character—such as respect, honesty, and responsibility—through a secular approach focused on developing moral habits in Western schools (Lickona, 2004). This program utilizes strategies such as recognizing student achievement, discussing values, and integrating moral values into the curriculum. Meanwhile, Islamic Moral Education emphasizes several important aspects: first, transcendent role models: the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is considered a good example, the highest moral model to be followed spiritually and practically (Al-Ahzab: 21). This transcendent model not only shows examples but is given high spiritual status, in contrast to the models in Western programs.

Second, the integration of ubudiyah values: Islamic education naturally combines faith (*aqidah*) and worship (*shariah*) in character practices, such as cleanliness through ablution, discipline through timely prayer. Third, a holistic approach: Islamic character education integrates the dimensions of faith, morals, and worship, rather than just social values, as in many Western programs. Comparative analysis reveals that the Islamic approach provides a more comprehensive scope, not only forming moral habits but also deepening students' spirituality and religious identity, an integration rarely found in Western character programs. This aligns with Lickona's (2004) concept of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action, but within an Islamic spiritual framework.

According to the Teacher Education Council (2007), to optimize Islamic Education teacher training in producing Islamic moral models, study programs at LPTK must include the following materials (Lickona et al., 2007): First, child development psychology, so that teachers understand the cognitive and moral stages of children, according to Piaget and Kohlberg's theories; second, social learning theory, including mastery of Bandura's theory on attention, retention, reproduction, motivation; third, moral microteaching, short video training (5-10 minutes) with collegial feedback sessions so that teachers get used to being real moral models; fourth, observation and modeling techniques, teachers are invited to practice their ability to see, imitate, and reflect on moral behavior in the context of class and school life.

This recommendation is supported by evidence that microteaching is an effective method of improving teaching skills according to John Hattie's review, and is suitable for honing teachers' modeling skills, especially behavioral and verbal modeling, which are crucial in character education (Lickona et al., 2007). By completing the LPTK curriculum with these four components, prospective teachers not only learn theory but also have the opportunity to practice directly in becoming Islamic role models, both in face-to-face settings and through digital content and the school environment.

Future Research and Research Limitations

Islamic character education based on teacher role models is a promising approach to shaping students' morally and spiritually whole personalities. However, to strengthen the effectiveness of this approach, more systematic and long-term follow-up research is needed. One important future research direction is longitudinal studies to evaluate the long-term impact of teacher role modeling on students' character, even after they graduate from educational institutions. Research by Martinez (2023), For example, it shows that teachers' gender stereotypes can influence students' academic achievement and career decisions over a period of years. This suggests that the influence of teachers as role models is not merely temporary, but can also shape students' future life paths (Martínez, 2023).

Furthermore, with the advancement of the digital era, there is a need to evaluate the effectiveness of digital modeling in moral education. The use of platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, or moral-based educational apps is

becoming increasingly common among teachers in conveying Islamic values. A study by Rahayu et al. (2024) confirmed that a pedagogically integrated digital approach can strengthen the internalization of character values, especially when accompanied by authentic and contextual content. However, quantitative, experimental research is still needed to assess the greater influence of digital models compared to direct models in shaping students' affective values (Rahayu et al., 2024).

Another aspect worth exploring is the comparison of modeling effectiveness between male and female teachers. While there is little research specifically comparing this in the context of Islamic moral education, role congruity theory, as developed by Whitley and Kite (2010), suggests that students' perceptions of moral authority can be influenced by gender. A deeper understanding of this could help develop more inclusive and gender-aware teacher training strategies (Kite et al., 2022). While this approach offers great potential, it is important to acknowledge several limitations in its implementation and the research conducted. One of these is the variation in teachers' understanding of the concept of morality. Many teachers define morality narrowly as polite behavior in school, without linking it to the principles of monotheism, worship, and other transcendental dimensions that are at the core of Islamic morality. This limited understanding can lead to inconsistent exemplary practices among teachers and between schools.

The second limitation lies in the influence of external factors that are not easily controlled by researchers, such as the family environment, media, or the community surrounding the students. These factors can strengthen or even disrupt the internalization of moral values acquired in the school environment. As explained in the article by Cardenala et al. (2023), a good teacher-student relationship is not always sufficient to guarantee optimal character education outcomes if it is not supported by a conducive social environment (Cardenala et al., 2023).

Another limitation is the lack of valid and reliable instruments to measure affective aspects in depth. Much character research still relies on behavioral observations or attitude questionnaires, while components such as empathy, moral awareness, and spiritual commitment are largely under-represented in available measurement tools. Therefore, it is necessary to develop an evaluation instrument for character education based on Islamic values that integrates the cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions. Future research should ideally employ a mixed methods approach with a longitudinal design, encompassing quantitative measurements based on psychometric scales and qualitative research through in-depth interviews with students, teachers, and alumni. This will provide a more comprehensive understanding of how teacher role models shape students' character in the short and long term, both in the context of in-person learning and in the increasingly complex digital era.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates a strong convergence between Bandura's Social Cognitive Learning Theory and the concept of Islamic moral education. Data from 15 case studies indicate that 78% of schools that systematically implemented teacher role modeling experienced significant improvements in student behavior ($p<0.05$), confirming the hypothesis that visual role modeling is more effective than verbal instruction. Bandura's four key processes (attention, retention, reproduction, motivation) are proven to be operational in an Islamic context when (1) Teachers integrate Islamic symbols (clothing, language) to increase attention. Moral values are repeated in daily activities (retention) the school environment supports this through triadic reciprocity.

The role model of teachers in Islam has a unique dimension that goes beyond Bandura's theory, namely (1) Transcendence of values: Teachers as an extension of the Prophet's example (Q.S. Al-Ahzab: 21). (2) Afterlife consequences: Internal motivation due to awareness of Allah's supervision (muraqabah). Although effective, this approach faces challenges in the digital era, particularly in the form of competition from social media influencers lack of modeling training for teachers.

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